

What Is Racism?

"Racism is **racial prejudice** and **discrimination** that are supported by institutional power and authority. The critical element that differentiates racism from prejudice and discrimination is the use of institutional power and authority to support prejudices and enforce discriminatory behaviors in systematic ways with far-reaching outcomes and effects. In the United States, racism is based on the ideology of White (European) supremacy and is used to the advantage of white people and the disadvantage of people of color."

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Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development

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But I'm just a person! I'm a part of the Same human race just like everyone else.

While you decide what your individual identity is, your belonging to one group or the other is also defined by the outside: your peers, your family, your community, your nation, and institutions like schools, healthcare, courts, workplaces, etc. Because of this nation's complicated history many marginalized groups in our country do not have the privilege of identifying themselves based on their individual merits, their talents, and their passions. In many cases, these groups were explicitly treated as less than human and even classified as such in our old laws and policies. These perceptions persist today and have been passed down through generations.

Our society reduces marginalized groups by creating stereotypes and generalizing perceptions (whether good or bad) that come to define individuals and the groups they belong to. These perceptions feed individual behaviors and institutional practices that affect housing, community development, career opportunities, income, educational

achievement, policing, criminal justice outcomes, etc. Yes, we are all part of one beautiful and incredibly diverse human race. But, until every single member of that human family's life is valued in the same way, we must get rid of the barriers that keeps us unequal.

If Race is Not Real, Why Can't we all Just Be Colorblind?

Remember, race is a "social construct", meaning: there is no real biological basis for the existence of different races as we know them. What keeps race such a central part of American life, is that our social, economic, political, cultural, and legal systems and institutions ALL continue to support the idea of a racial difference and a racial hierarchy. So while race might not be "biologically real", it is definitely socially real and racism is a social reality. Systems of power work to create a hierarchy based on an idea of racial difference. This heirarchy is built into our institutions, societal structures, cultural beliefs, and systems and forms the building blocks of racism and racial injustice.

The solution, however, is not a cold-turkey colorblind approach. Pretending that race and racial hierarchy don't exist will not stop racial injustice. This is because the racial system is as much a part of our American culture as a hamburger and fries. We eat it, we buy it,

we raise and grow the ingredients for it, we promote it, we celebrate with it, we love it. So it's not as easy as saying hamburgers don't exist.

We would have to put an end to all the processes and systems that make burgers and fried possible-- like farming and agriculture, government support and subsidies, fast food corporations, and popular demand for burgers (which would require a whole rewiring of our food culture over generations). It may seem like a silly example, but it helps us understand that what we're reacting to: race and racism, is actually just the product of, or the tip of a much larger and deeper iceberg that gives it its power.

In addition, colorblind policies have been proven to not get rid of racial bias and racism in practice. Colorblindness also fails to acknowledge that due to historic inequalities, whole generations of people of color are actually already "behind" and continue to require additional support to even catch up to the access and opportunities of the white majority over generations.

**I've been Discriminated
Against Because I'm
White. Isn't that Reverse
Racism?**

Our experiences shape who we are. It is likely that all of us have experienced some form of discrimination at the hands of a group we don't belong to. All of us can have prejudices against a different racial group and we can even act on these prejudices through individual acts of discrimination. But because racism, as we discussed above, is always about power and institutional authority, these moments of discrimination against a white person are not acts of racism. They can be products of bigotry, intolerance, ignorance, etc. But they cannot be racism. Remember, racism is not personal, it's structural.

Some further reading:

[4 Reverse Racism Myths That Need to Stop \(Huffington Post\)](#)

[Reverse Racism Isn't Real \(Feminist Culture\)](#)

Reverse racism isn't real. No, really.

The “reverse racism” card is often pulled by white people when people of color call out racism and discrimination, or create spaces for themselves (think BET) that white people aren't a part of. The impulse behind the reverse racism argument seems to be a desire to prove that people of color don't have it that bad, they're not the *only* ones that are put at a disadvantage [or targeted](#) because of their race. It's like the Racism Olympics. And it's patently untrue.

It really all comes down to semantics. At some point, the actual *meaning* of “racism” got mixed up with other aspects of racism — prejudice, bigotry, ignorance, and so on. It's true: White people *can* experience prejudice from black people and other non-whites. Black people *can* have ignorant, backwards ideas about white people, as well as other non-white races. No one is trying to deny that. But racism is far more complex.

Before you cry outrage and send me a nasty email about how reverse racist this article is, calm down. *Listen*.

This scene from 2014's "Dear White People" breaks down the concept pretty succinctly:

Some people simplify racism as one group not liking another, and think "racist" and "prejudiced" are interchangeable. But racism is a concept that operates on both an individual *and* institutional level.

At its core, racism is a system in which a dominant race benefits off the oppression of others -- whether they want to or not. We don't live in a society where every racial group has equal power, status, and opportunity. Yes, white people all over the world and throughout history have experienced atrocities like slavery and persecution. But *in the very specific context of American history*, white people have not been enslaved, colonized, or forced to segregate on the scale that black people have. They do not face housing or job discrimination, police brutality, poverty, or incarceration at the level that black people do. This is not to say that they do not experience things like poverty and police brutality at all. But again, *not on the same scale* -- not even close. *That* is the reality of racism.

What's astounding about the reverse racism argument is the way in which it reveals some racists' deep need to deny the idea of having any privilege. Rather than acknowledging the realities of how people of color deal with racism, white racists do mental and hypothetical cartwheels in order to justify these injustices.

There have been [so many explainers](#) on why the concept of reverse racism is inherently wrong, so many breakdowns, but perhaps another way to tackle this discussion is to address some of the main topics and issues that get called out as reverse racism. Here are four common arguments that have no merit:

1. Affirmative Action takes jobs and scholarships away from white people.

The affirmative action debate has been raging for decades, with many people arguing that it's a prime example of reverse racism. They believe deserving white students are discriminated against while academically unqualified students are given highly coveted college or company positions — just because they happen to tick the "ethnic minority" box. This argument ignores the fact that affirmative action did not come out of nowhere — there was a need for a system that

would address the decades of underrepresentation of people of color both academically and in the job world.

Affirmative action does *not* favor people of color over whites, but ensures that they are considered equally. Even now, **white college students are [40% more likely to get private scholarships](#) than minorities**, and although 62% of college students in America are white, these students receive 69% of all private scholarships. Someone with a “white sounding” name is [50% more likely to get a job call back than a person with an “ethnic”](#) sounding name, according to a 2003 study. Affirmative action doesn’t take anything away from anyone. It levels the playing field.

2. White culture can be appropriated, too.

Recently, [I wrote an article explaining why it’s problematic for white women to wear black hairstyles](#). I got hundreds of messages from angry people asking, “Well, what about black women straightening their hair or dyeing their hair blonde?” First of all — there are, gasp, black people in the world with naturally blonde hair and blue eyes. But that’s besides the point. The need to flip the script when it comes to cultural appropriation is wrong because it willfully removes context and history from the equation. Black people conforming to white or Western standards of beauty is the product of a need to survive in a society in which wearing hair in its natural state can cost [black men and women their jobs](#) and even [their educations](#).

“So is it appropriation if black people use math or fly in airplanes?” No. ☹️. Aspects of modern civilization are [not hallmarks of white culture](#), and anyone who thinks they are has a skewed vision of the world.

3. Black-on-white crime is proof that black people just hate all whites!

When conversations about police brutality or hate crimes come up, there are some racists who are quick to point out the [rate of black-on-white crime](#), and argue that these instances are racially motivated attacks against white people — in other words, hate crimes. It’s simply not true.

According to the [FBI’s most recent 2011 study on homicide](#), 83 percent of white murder victims were killed by fellow whites, while only 14 percent of white victims were murdered by blacks. But beyond numbers, black-on-white crime is a social problem — it isn’t systemic. [More than 100 unarmed black people](#) were killed by police in 2014.

Guilty or not, this number of deaths in comparison to how many white people were killed is staggering.

4. BET, Black Girls Rock and Black History Month exclude white people. How racist!!

Things like Black History Month, BET, and Black Girls Rock are not “reverse racist” against white people, they’re not examples of a double standard in which White History Month, The White Entertainment Channel, and [White Girls Rock would be considered offensive](#). “Why isn’t there a White History Month?” you ask? To repeat a very true cliché — *all* history is white history. Most black children in America will learn they are descended from slaves before they learn they are descended from ancient African civilizations.

These institutions are created out of necessity, and the argument that they should not exist speaks to the pervasiveness of white privilege. Donald Trump actually took issue with the show “Black-ish,” complaining that the show was racist [because](#). “Can you imagine the furor of a show, “White-ish”! Racism at highest level?” Yes, Mr. Trump, one of the few black family sitcoms on TV, produced and written by a black person, playfully dismantling racial stereotypes and striving to include everyone in the conversation, is “racism at its highest level.” Or maybe it’s just long overdue?

If you think about it, reverse racism is actually kinda great. Because if it did exist, it would mean we lived in a society in which all racial groups have an equal amount of power. But we don’t. So to those who cry “reverse racism” when a show like “Black-ish” premieres or [President Obama uses the N-word](#) -- please, just stop.

CORRECTIONS: *An earlier version of this story cited an unrelated Pew Research Study; the correct study has been included. The date of the release of “Dear White People” was also listed incorrectly as 2013. The story has been updated to clarify a previous reference to white people having never been enslaved as being limited to American history.*